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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

16 May 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet and Chinese Conduct in the Vietnam Crisis -- A View of the Next Several Weeks

Caveats

1. Judgments on the probable attitudes and actions of the two Communist powers over the next several weeks are obviously of a highly perishable nature. Principal factors which underlie our uncertainty at the present moment are:

a. It is a moving situation. Developments, accidental or otherwise, in the war theater could suddenly unhinge the consensus apparently reached in both Moscow and Peking to follow a course of restraint for the present.

b. We have no knowledge of the estimate being made in Moscow and Peking about the duration and intensity of our interdiction campaign and its effectiveness. If they believe, as most analysts have so far, that adequate supply movements to the DRV can be

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maintained over land routes from China, they are under no pressure to confront the US with dramatic countermeasures or to try to prevail on Hanoi to adjust its negotiating stance. If they believe, or come to believe as the US air effort continues, that Hanoi's war effort will be seriously crippled, then the situation and choices they face will be quite different.

c. We are uninformed as to what private communication may be taking place between Moscow and Washington.

Soviet Interests

2. The Soviets have never had, and presumably do not have now, a vital interest in the success of Hanoi's military campaign in South Vietnam and Indochina. They would prefer to have Hanoi accomplish its aims, partly because they would welcome a setback for US policy and partly because they would hope to strengthen their influence in Hanoi on the basis of a claim that they had given loyal aid to the "liberation" struggle. But they have hoped that the final resolution would be by a negotiated settlement in which, again for the sake of winning credit in Hanoi, they might play some role. In any case, Moscow is not prepared to assume risks solely to insure the success of Hanoi's cause in the South.

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3. The recent military escalation by both sides is full of awkwardness for broader Soviet policy interests. The pending Summit and agreements presumably to be accomplished or advanced on that occasion -- SALT and trade in particular -- are key elements in the design of Soviet foreign policy at present. Equally important are the ratification of the German treaties and the Berlin accords and further steps to develop the policy of detente in Europe. Any significant risk that confrontation over Vietnam could sour the climate of East-West relations and abort these Soviet policy initiatives must be most unwelcome in Moscow.

4. It must have been mainly concern for these broader policy interests which produced the initial mild Soviet reaction to the President's interdiction moves. Moscow adopted a course designed to limit damage to these interests while at the same time saying the minimum necessary by way of condemning the illegality of US actions and promising continued support to its Vietnamese allies.

5. This is a delicately tuned response, devised in some haste in the face of complex considerations, and one that it may not be possible to sustain as the new phase of action in Vietnam unfolds. The affront to Soviet prestige in the denial of access to DRV ports is serious. We do not know whether support in the leadership for the course chosen was unanimous,

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and we would suspect that opponents of Brezhnev would not be slow to exploit any vulnerability he may have in consequence of the present turn of events. It is possible that if the air campaign against North Vietnam is sustained on its present scale and intensity, the Soviets will conclude eventually that they have no recourse but to react more harshly. Should the German treaties fail in the Bundestag this week, which does not now seem likely, the pressure to do so could increase. Elements in the leadership which for many reasons may oppose the present direction of policy could ultimately gain the upper hand, and Brezhnev himself might then sponsor a sharp turn which would put a sudden and threatening chill on relations with Washington.

6. In short, we think that the Soviets will prefer to continue on a course aimed at containing and controlling the present crisis, but we are not at all sure that they will feel able to keep their voices low and their actions restrained as the action in and around North Vietnam continues.

China's Interests

7. China's principal interests in Vietnam are to insure that no unfriendly regime is installed in the North, to encourage the complete withdrawal of US forces from the area, to limit Soviet influence in Hanoi while enhancing its own, and to see the eventual success of Hanoi's cause in the South.

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8. None of these interests, save the first, is sufficiently vital as to cause Peking to confront the US directly with its own combat forces and the security of the regime in Hanoi does not appear threatened in the current situation. Nor is Peking's "face" directly involved in the mining of the ports since little attention has been paid to China's seaborne traffic with North Vietnam and the world tends to assume that all Chinese aid of military significance is delivered by overland means.

9. Peking will not wish to foreclose a continuing dialogue with the US and it probably judges that current US actions do not mean a reversal of the trend toward a reduction of the US military presence in Southeast Asia. Thus China's basic posture will be one of caution and restraint so long as this seems a feasible course in the light of attitudes and actions adopted by Hanoi and Moscow. If Hanoi demands stronger action and Moscow responds, the Chinese will probably feel obliged to follow suit.

10. We do not believe that the present events in Vietnam will upset the power relations among Peking factions, but what those relations are is something we know very little about. If the US actions against the DRV are sustained and inflict greater damage than had been anticipated, we would have to judge that Chou-en-Lai's position would be placed under some strain and that China might be led to react more harshly than it has thus far.

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What Will They Do?

11. The Summit. It seems very unlikely that at this late stage the Soviets will move from their side to cancel or postpone the Summit. They evidently prefer, if this is to happen, to leave it to the President's initiative. This may have been a close decision, based on a calculation that an image of restraint and steadiness would benefit them more than the appearance of weakness in the face of the US challenge would hurt them. Concern not to upset current bilateral dealings with the US in many areas and for the success of their European policy would have weighed heavily in the balance. If the President himself should move to suspend the Summit, the Soviet preference would probably be for an agreed announcement of a postponement.

12. Assuming that the Summit goes forward, the Soviets will be correct and businesslike, though they may want to omit public occasions where the leaders might be expected to show warmth and friendliness. The Soviet side will try to avoid any close coupling of Vietnam with other matters. They will not bargain on main bilateral issues with offers of or demands for concessions on Vietnam. It seems unlikely that Hanoi would allow Moscow room for maneuver in this respect in any case.

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13. The Soviet leaders must be almost as concerned as the President that during his stay there will be dramatic and embarrassing developments in Vietnam. So far as they can control events they will try to avoid such developments, but they are almost certainly not in a position to ask Hanoi to withhold offensive action. If there should be major battlefield reverses for South Vietnam during the President's stay, they would probably urge renewed attempts at negotiation. But they are not likely to be able to deliver their Vietnamese allies in a more accommodating mood.

14. With imagination, and that only, it is possible to conceive a more dramatic scenario in Moscow. The Soviets could try to use the occasion to bring the President together with highest level personalities from Hanoi, calculating that the new situation on the ground in Vietnam now finally made some kind of compromise formula possible of acceptance by both sides. If the Soviets could bring off something like this, it would be a grand triumph for Soviet diplomacy and would put a strong wind in the sails of all their policies. But there is nothing in the declared positions of the parties involved in the Vietnam struggle to suggest that anything like this is within reach. Further, the strong aversion Peking would have to such a proceeding in Moscow, a feeling of which Hanoi would be fully aware, would pose a serious obstacle.

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15. Countering the Interdiction Campaign. For the present, the Soviets will probably not attempt to challenge the closure of DRV ports by sweeping mines or other direct measures. The naval units reported to be under way toward the scene of action may assemble in or near the Gulf of Tonkin but their mission will probably be only to make a demonstration, to jangle nerves in Washington, and perhaps to lay the basis for taking credit eventually if things work out well. Of course, if the Soviets decided later to challenge closure of the ports, the presence of their vessels on the scene would enable them to act quickly on this option.

16. The Chinese, too, are likely to refrain from any direct challenge to the closure of the ports. We assume, though we have no evidence, that the Soviets, Chinese, and Vietnamese are consulting on ways to assure delivery of vital supplies by land routes from China. In the circumstances, the parties will probably have no difficulty in making such arrangements. Both the Soviets and Chinese would have an incentive to avoid open political friction in connection with this matter.

17. At this juncture, we do not know how effective the US air interdiction campaign against the logistic effort from China into North Vietnam will be. If it is anything like as effective as the claims some have made for it suggest, and if it is sustained over some weeks or longer, then the two Communist powers will face new decisions.

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18. The Chinese earlier had a substantial force of logistic and air defense troops in North Vietnam. If they judged that the reintroduction of such units was necessary to assure the flow of supplies and preserve their credit in Hanoi, they would take this step. The Chinese would probably also, as they did before, make airfields available as sanctuary for DRV aircraft if this becomes necessary.

19. As for the Soviets, they will probably respond to Hanoi's demands for aid in strengthening air defenses. We would not exclude the appearance of Soviet personnel, probably unacknowledged, in helping to man air defenses, but we would not think that Soviet-manned aircraft would join the action over North Vietnam. A massive supply effort by air has also been suggested as a possible Soviet measure; this too Moscow would probably consider too risky and difficult to execute, and perhaps ineffective as well.

In Sum

20. For the next several weeks at least -- certainly through the President's visit -- the Soviets probably do not intend to raise the ante of confrontation, even though they will do some things to demonstrate their loyalty to and support for Hanoi. They will follow this course of restraint because they do not wish to see their present policies vis-a-vis the US and Europe derailed, and perhaps because they judge that Hanoi's military

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successes in South Vietnam will in any case force the US before long to accept Communist terms for settlement. It is conceivable that the Chinese, impelled by a desire to steal a march on the Soviets, would take a stronger line. We doubt this because we think that Peking's moves toward normalization in relations with the US represent a fundamental shift in policy which would not be abandoned in order to support Hanoi's ambitions in Indochina.

21. We would not project the appraisal given above for more than a few weeks. Though we do not think so, it may become evident over that period that the effort to supply North Vietnam through China will not be sufficient to sustain Hanoi's effort. In that case, assuming that Hanoi has not yet won its gamble in the South, its allies would have a new choice to make. They could counsel Hanoi to moderate its ambitions and settle in negotiations for what it could get, or they could raise a more direct challenge to the US actions against North Vietnam. The scale of human and material loss inflicted on the North Vietnamese by then might compel the latter course. But at the pace events are now moving it would be foolhardy to estimate Soviet and Chinese actions that far down the road.

22. Reason would suggest that, since none of the powers concerned claims a vital interest in the outcome of the Vietnam struggle, they will not allow the main lines of their policy, toward each other and toward other

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world issues, to be thrown off course by the present violent phase in Vietnam. In fact, we do believe that the main pattern of development in Soviet-American and Chinese-American relations will survive Vietnam whatever the outcome there. But this will be true only if the strains of the present confrontation do not bring about a major shift in the political forces which now dominate the policies of the Communist powers.

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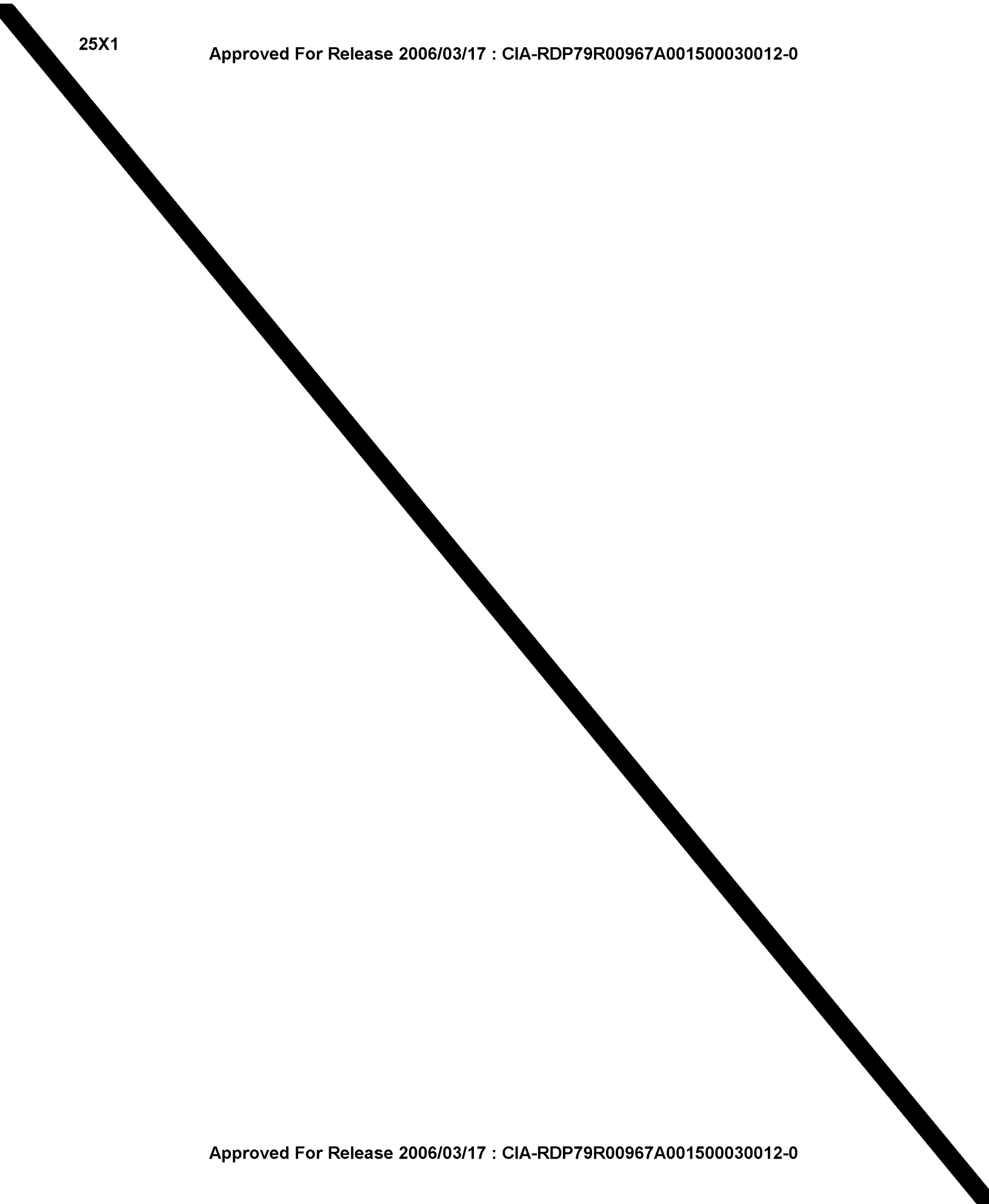

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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

You may think the estimating in this piece is pretty hazardous, but I thought a little boldness at this moment would be more useful than a lot of hedges.

JOHN HUIZENGA

16 May 1972
(DATE)

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